Gabriel Farrell

Knots and Notches

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KNOTS AND NOTCHES

PERKINS INSTITUTION
and
MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND
Watertown, Massachusetts

MATTRESSES

Made and Remade

Sterilizing

New Ticking

Inner Springs

PILLOWS AND PUFFS

Also Remade

CHAIRS CANED

Rush Seating

PIANO TUNING

Also Minipianos

TENNIS RACKETS

Restrung

ALL BY BLIND WORKERS

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KNOTS AND NOTCHES

A Story of Mattress Making

by

Gabriel Farrell

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Newton

WHILE it is generally known that the blind through their highly developed sense of touch have a skill which enables them to make and remake mattresses with unusual ability many people have wondered how they are able to tell one mattress from another or how they can see that the right hair goes into the right ticking. That question was asked Mr. Frank C. Bryan, who for thirty years has been in charge of the workshop of the Perkins Institution for the Blind at South Boston.

" Oh, that's simple," he replied. " It's a system of knots and notches."

"Knots and notches, how come?" we queried.

"'Well, it's this way," replied Mr. Bryan. " When a mattress arrives in one of our trucks it is unloaded at the receiving room by Joe Chalieu who has

been receiving mattresses steadily since 1886, even though he has never seen a single one, because he has no sight. The instruction coming with the mattress, or the letter concerning it, is taken by a clerk who has sight and she makes a record for the office and places a tag on the mattress. Joe then reaches for two short pieces of string with safety pins on them which he has hanging nearby. One is for the ticking, the other for the hair stuffing. On these strings Joe ties a series of knots which indicate to the blind workers the number of the job — one on the ticking and one on the hair. So, you see, there is no chance of getting the wrong hair into the wrong ticking," concluded Mr. Bryan.

"But we don't see!" we exclaimed.

"That's the point," said Mr. Bryan. "You don't have to see. You feel. Now take this string which is going on this mattress. What do you feel?"

We ran our fingers along the string. "Oh, here's a knot, now a space, now eight knots close together, now a space, now six knots."

"Exactly," said the manager. "The number of that job is 186. Simple, isn't it?"

"When Joe places these tags on the job," continued Mr. Bryan, "the mat-

tress, which has been resting on a metal table so as not to get dust from the floor, after being weighed, goes on the elevator to the fourth floor. There it is pulled apart, the ticking saved if it is to go on the mattress again or returned as indicated on the tag. The hair is sent to the bin room where it occupies a bin separate from any other mattress.

When its turn comes the hair is placed in the sterilizer if so ordered and then sent to the picking machine. This combs the strands of matted hair making it soft

and fluffy. As this machine has dangerous prongs revolving it is operated by Homer Ferron, who has partial sight, and as it is very noisy it is doubly convenient that Homer is also deaf. The refreshed and cleansed hair then is stored in a separate bin preparatory to being dropped down a chute to the third floor where the remaking of the mattress takes place."

If one were to visit the workshop of the Perkins Institution at South Boston, where this kind of work has been done by blind labor for nearly one hundred years, Mr. Bryan would take him immediately to the third floor of the new building which is one of the finest plants for the making of mattresses in this country, if not in the world. The new shop has complete facilities of the finest kind. Every table, chair and other equipment is of pressed steel, and as the building is of concrete and brick construction it is absolutely fireproof. This not only affords safety to the blind workers but also eliminates fire risk on the many mattresses, chairs and other articles of furniture which are in process of renovation there.

The room in which the mattresses are made is perhaps the most interesting of all. It is a large room occupying two-

thirds of the floor of the structure, the other third being where the separate bins for the hair and other supplies are. The long side is all glass affording a view over Dorchester Bay which, strange to many, the workers enjoy as well as the visitors. The cool sea breezes which come into the building during the summer months can be fully enjoyed by those without sight. In this room under the most ideal conditions the mattress-making is done by totally blind men, many of whom have worked for Perkins most of their adult lives.

Looking down the length of the room one sees several tables at which men are working on mattresses. The tables are high enough so that the men work comfortably standing up. They are of green pressed steel and the tops are made of slats. Mr. Bryan is quick to point out that that aspect makes these tables different from tables on which sighted workers make mattresses. Seeing men reach under the mattress and on top of the tables to run through the threads which tuft down the mattress but the blind reach under the table and run their needles up through the slots between the table slats. This enables them to keep the tufts in a straight line, and is less disturbing to the rebuilt mattress.

The question naturally arises as to where the made-up ticks come from, for we have followed the process from the hair treatment. They are made up partly by blind women operating power sewing machines. Seeing women run the cutting machines and some of the sewing machines. One might say that because of that it should not be said that the mattresses are entirely made by blind labor. But that is hardly fair for the preparing of the ticks is only like the assembling of materials, even as the bridgemaker has his steel fabricated for him and the artist buys the elementary colors for his creation.

The art of mattress-making lies in the skill of its construction and the evenness of its stuffing. And it is in this art that the blind excel. This is due first of all to their highly developed sense of touch. Many people think that the blind lacking one of the senses have compensation through a natural keenness of the other senses. This is not so but it is true that the alert blind use their other senses, especially the sense of touch, more effectively than seeing people do. This is not, however, a natural gift but the result of long practice and development. The blind mattress-maker who can do a superlative job is able to do so because

he has developed a sense of touch far beyond the normal seeing person.

With this highly developed sense of touch the blind worker takes the hair bearing the string marked 186 by knots and places it in the tick marked 186 and begins to build a mattress.

"Oh, yes," we said, "that accounts for the knots; but what about the notches?" we asked Mr. Bryan.

"This is just where they come in," smiled the genial manager.

When the hair and the ticking are assembled on the make-up tables the

blind worker finds on the ticking the tag placed on it at the receiving room. This is an ordinary tag about three inches by six inches. At least it looked ordinary until one noticed queer notches all along the edges. As we look closely we see the notches but the blind worker feels them so we have a medium of instruction which both the seeing and the blind can read. The system of notches is a little more complicated than the system of knots but when understood it is an infallible guide to the blind workers. For example, one notch on the lower edge means to make the mattress soft, while two notches mean make it hard. So the housewife gets the mattress just as she wants it. Three notches mean that the size or shape is to be altered. A notch on the end means to add hair to that which came in the mattress, to replace that wasted in picking.

A notch on the string end of the tag means that the mattress is being made for a hospital. Hospital mattresses differ from other mattresses in that they are tufted nearer together. This prevents matting and becoming hard because of almost constant use without turning. Perkins has done over mattresses for many hospitals in New England. It has done work for the Bos-

ton City Hospital for many years. The City of Boston has always been generous in its employment of blind labor from Perkins Institution, for the piano tuners from Perkins Institution have kept the many pianos of the Boston public schools in tune for fifty years.

One more interesting mark on the tag is the clipping of the lower right hand corner. That means, to the blind worker, Mr. Bryan informed us, "see me." When the worker feels that clipped corner he sends for the manager for it indicates that special instructions are needed before proceeding with the work. When he had explained this last sign Mr. Bryan added, "Well, now, you see how simple it all is because of the knots and the notches."

"Yes," we replied, "now we see how the right hair goes in the right ticking and also how and why Perkins blind workers have sustained a reputation for nearly one hundred years." But, we added to ourselves, in order that all may see and understand, there ought to be a tag at the front door of the South Boston Workshop with the lower right corner clipped off. For the way to see all this is to "see Mr. Bryan."

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